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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [GAZA](#) [DISENGAGEMENT](#)

SUBJECT: GAZA: SECURITY DETERIORATES, PA HESITATES BUT
HAMAS CONSOLIDATES

Classified By: DCM Gene A. Gretz, for Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: A Norwegian diplomat who has covered the Gaza Strip for the past two years sees the security situation deteriorating even further in the coming months. He believes that a variety of armed groups, including factions within Fatah, will continue to seek illicit financial and political gains in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal. Although the GON continues to regard Hamas as a terrorist organization and remains concerned about the group's long-term objectives, it is coming to view Hamas as a potentially stabilizing influence in Gaza, at least in the short term. Hamas members holding positions in Gaza municipalities tend to be well educated, effective, non-ideological, and uncorrupted, according to the Norwegian diplomat, who also remains highly skeptical that any amount of foreign assistance will significantly alter Gazans' negative opinions of the PA and its corrupt representatives. He said he expects Hamas to secure between 30 and 40 percent of the seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in the January 2005 elections. End Summary.

2. (C) On September 12, Norwegian Diplomat Dr. Jonas Jolle met with Econoff to discuss the current situation in the Gaza Strip and prospects for any improvement in the economic situation there. As a First Secretary at Norway's Representative Office to the Palestinian Authority, Jolle has been responsible for covering the Gaza Strip for the past two years. He regularly travels to Gaza and has spent most of the last five weeks there reporting on the GOI disengagement.

Security: Downward Spiral

3. (C) Jolle, having left Gaza the day before after an extended stay, remarked that the security situation is deteriorating significantly and that he expects it to get worse in the coming months. He assigned much of the blame to factions within Fatah, but also mentioned other groups, including some founded by militant Islamists. According to Jolle, the perpetrators of killings, kidnappings, and other crimes are more interested in securing a share in the spoils of the Israeli departure than in any immediate political gains. As political power is dependent on patronage systems, however, those who have gained the most financially will be better positioned to wield influence.

4. (C) Jolle characterized much of the violence and criminal activity as unorganized and sometimes random. He said, for example, that those responsible for the recent kidnapping of an Italian journalist had initially intended only to set up a roadblock to protest the lack of jobs. When this tactic failed to generate any response from the PA, they briefly detained the foreign journalist to demonstrate their seriousness. In some instances, according to Jolle, an armed group may be comprised of friends and acquaintances who, over coffee and a shared water pipe, decide to work together to settle an old score or achieve some mutual financial gain, after which they quickly disband. Jolle said he believes that the armed groups operating in Gaza know full well that the PA is incapable of holding them accountable for their acts, particularly when those responsible come from powerful families.

5. (C) Jolle acknowledged, however, that the assassination of former Gaza security chief Mousa Arafat was well organized and most likely involved larger and long-established groups. He said that, according to rumors circulating in Gaza, shortly after the attack on his home began, Arafat made several phone calls to senior PA officials who either declined to speak with him or were otherwise unresponsive to his pleas for help. Jolle asserted that senior PA officials probably were not directly involved in the killing, but some may have been aware that another attempt on Arafat's life was being planned. Jolle said he had met with Arafat two days before his death. He described Arafat as someone who had apparently come to terms with his demotion and did not indicate any intention of challenging the PA or any of its leaders. Jolle added that, due to his ruthlessness, Arafat had many enemies.

Hamas to the Rescue?

16. (C) Jolle said that, despite its rhetoric and the celebratory displays of its gun-toting members, Hamas has had a stabilizing influence on the security situation in Gaza. Hamas denied involvement in Arafat's assassination and has generally refrained from other acts of violence, according to Jolle. While this approach may be only temporary, Jolle asserted that Hamas's ability to discipline members who deviate from the leadership's instructions has helped mitigate the extent of the lawlessness.

17. (C) Jolle said he has been impressed by the caliber of Hamas members serving in municipal positions in Gaza. He said that Hamas members generally tend to be effective bureaucrats. For example, Hamas members serving the municipalities of Beit Hanun and Deir al-Balah are well educated, non-ideological, uncorrupted and responsive to the needs of their constituencies. In one instance, according to Jolle, newly elected Hamas members immediately impounded and then sold municipality vehicles previously given out on the basis of personal connections to those in power rather than professional need. Hamas members elected to professional associations in Gaza have proven to be competent and committed to democratic practices in governing these organizations. Nevertheless, Jolle said he and his government are still wary of Hamas's intentions and remain uncomfortable attributing anything positive to what they still consider to be a terrorist organization.

Absence of Alternatives

18. (C) The challenge, according to Jolle, is how to deal with Hamas given its political ascendancy and spreading popularity among Palestinians, who increasingly regard it as the only real alternative to a corrupt and ineffective PA leadership. He asserted that the occupation was responsible for "an ossified political system" in the West Bank and Gaza. In the past decade, Palestinians have grown increasingly tired of the same wasteful and corrupt officials. Abbas has not sufficiently altered the status quo to change those views. Jolle identified only two Palestinian leaders as representing a "new generation:" Minister of Interior Dahlan and Marwan Barghouti. He added, however, that Dahlan may not be any less corrupt than the others.

19. (C) Jolle said that Dahlan and others who may wish to challenge the current leadership are biding their time, in part to avoid a civil war within Fatah. For example, contrary to what most observers would expect of a political party, Fatah will not be holding a party conference until after the January 2006 PLC elections. In the meantime, Hamas continues to gain supporters, even among non-religious, western-educated Palestinians. He said he expects Hamas to secure between 30 and 40 percent of the seats in the PLC, and holds out little hope that a viable secular party will emerge to challenge Hamas anytime soon. Despite his favorable impressions of several Hamas members -- including some who had stepped down after losing professional association elections -- Jolle said Hamas might harbor a "one vote, one time" hidden agenda. It may hope to take control of the PA by democratic means but may never cede power thereafter.

Wishful Thinking?

10. (C) Jolle was skeptical that any near-term improvement in the Gazan economy will foster greater support for the PA in the January 2006 elections. He said that the USG, the EU and his own government are hoping that international assistance flowing into the area will help stabilize the situation and create a groundswell of support for Abbas and the PA. Jolle said he is convinced that no matter how much money is provided, "you can't buy votes" for the PA. PA officials are discredited, if not despised, and no amount of money, foreign aid, or infrastructure projects will change that, certainly not by January 2006, he added. He also questioned the PA's ability to absorb and responsibly manage a significant increase in foreign assistance.

11. (C) Jolle characterized the economic situation in Gaza as grim. Citing Gaza's high birthrate, massive unemployment, weak government institutions, corruption and lack of security that will continue to scare off potential investors, Jolle said he is pessimistic about any significant improvement. Conditions in Gaza would constitute an almost insurmountable challenge for any developing country. Beyond that, Gaza has the additional and unique handicap of not being able to control its own borders and operate an airport or seaport. Jolle said he doubts that Gaza can achieve the economic growth necessary to transform the area into a model for anything.

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